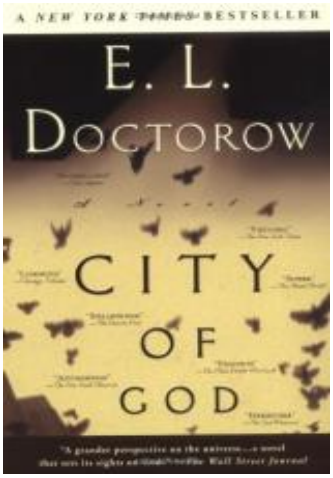
City of God

by E. L. Doctorow



About the Book

As diversely populated and wide-ranging as it seems, E. L. Doctorow's novel can nonetheless be viewed as a singular, intricately rendered portrait of one man's peripatetic imagination and streaming consciousness. Everything we read about in **City of God**?from the Episcopal priest in the throes of a crisis of faith and the bereaved rabbi endeavoring to redirect the destiny of the entire Jewish tradition, to a Holocaust survivor's harrowing ghetto narrative and the pair of lushly imagistic verse poems about the World Wars?presumably flows from a single, blinking computer cursor that is manipulated by a middle-aged New York novelist named Everett. With Everett as his protagonist and millennially harried Everyman, Doctorow takes readers on a sweeping survey of the twentieth century, channeling the voices of Albert Einstein, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Frank Sinatra, as well as the voices of Everett's fellow fictional beings, who occupy the novel's principal narrative. Beginning with his novel's title and its Augustinian overtones, every aspect of Doctorow's survey is in the service of the novel's thematic preoccupation with the nature of belief, the mystery of human consciousness, and above all, "our wrecked romance with God."

As **City of God** begins, readers find Everett?a secular man without extensive training in astronomy or physics?riffing on the cosmos and dropping some poetry-tinged science. As he summarizes modern conceptions of the history of the universe, Everett struggles with the mind-dwarfing notions of two tenets that are central both to the novel itself as well as to the Judeo-Christian religious tradition writ large: the notion of a "singular original" Creator, and the belief in an ever-approaching and ultimately unknowable human destiny. If the Big Bang engendered fifteen billion years of spatial expansion, then to what end is this expansion progressing? And as to the space itself (our universe) that is expanding: what, exactly, is it filling up or replacing? And above all, Everett wonders, what kind of "fearsome" God could be involved in these concepts of "disastrous, hopeless infinitude," this "fluke happenstance," this apparently "accidental" genesis? Here, in Everett's universal musings, which appear frequently in the first forty or so pages of the book, Doctorow illuminates an unresolvable disconnect between Reason and Faith, or between scientific understandings about the origin of life and organized religion's increasingly untenable narratives about the same. This same crucial disconnect comes to play a primary part in the story of the Reverend Dr. Thomas Pemberton, to whom we are introduced as the first-

person narrator of the new book Everett is sketching out.

In the early pages of the novel, an enormous brass cross is heisted from St. Timothy's Episcopal on the Lower East Side. Pemberton, D.D. (for "Divinity Detective"), sets off in search of it, yet he senses from the start that this is no ordinary theft, with no ordinary solution. "So now these people," Pem says, "have lifted our cross. It bothered me at first. But now I'm beginning to see it differently. That whoever stole the cross had to do it. And wouldn't that be blessed? Christ going where He is needed?" When the cross turns up on the roof of the fledgling Synagogue for Evolutionary Judaism on the Upper West Side, Pem realizes he is being led by fate. With Rabbi Sarah, Pem seeks to transcend the constraints of storytelling and to reclaim an elusive, pre-scriptural (pre-narrative) state of "unmediated awe." **City of God**'s own story climaxes here, with Pem on the verge of Jewish conversion, giving what is in a sense his final sermon, telling God that consciousness, our stories, our language, all of them are "not enough." "If we are to remake [rewrite] ourselves, we must remake you, Lord."

Through Everett, E. L. Doctorow serves up an amalgam of literary genres dealing with a common theme. He introduces a series of tenuously related stories comprised of philosophical meanderings, sleuthing narratives, cultural histories, theological musings, science lessons on the life of ants, explications and deconstructions of pop lyrics, film treatments, poetry, and even a head-spinning monologue from the twentieth century's silver-throated Chairman of the Board. The dizzying array of styles, tones, and rhythms pile up on us like so much history. Doctorow has rendered what might be viewed as a prose simulation of contemporary Western consciousness: eclectic, scattered, unresolved, attention-deficit-disordered, overloaded with information, and tremendously burdened by the weight of so much devastating human history. Clearly, a linear, A-to-B narrative has no chance of reproducing the disjointed, poignant rhythms of the shell-shocked, end-of-the-century New York City which Doctorow imagines here. Like the Bible (the prototypical fusion of disparate stories on a common theme), like a city, like the whole of literature, and like contemporary life itself, Everett's stream of fragments in **City of God** resembles "a great historically amassed communal creation" derived from the Word and from the evolutions of culture that language makes possible.

Discussion Guide

1. One critic has written that **City of God** is a story about storytelling?about the ubiquity of narrative; about the whole of language existing as a storytelling tool to reflect and respond to reality; about consciousness perceived as a narrative (hi)story. Do you agree with this characterization? Discuss the dozens of stories that comprise Doctorow's book, from the story of the universe to Yehoshua's ghetto narrative, highlighting the interplay that exists among them.

2. Discuss the structure, language, and imagery of **City of God**. In what ways does it mimic or recreate the rhythms of contemporary thought and life? How might Doctorow's structure?full as it is of spiraling ideas, images, and themes which recur and continually double back on themselves?be viewed as a sort of jazz-like innovation on the Wagnerian leitmotif? To what end do these spiraling repetitions of theme progress? How do they all relate to and riff upon the central mystery of the missing cross?

3. When Pem goes to the cancer ward just after leaving the priesthood, he encounters a group of dying people singing twentieth-century standards. Discuss the implications of this scene. Why does it affect Pem the way it does? What does it mean when the pop song, that most "self-referential" and instantly recognizable of all musical genres, is transformed into a sort of secular hymnal?

4. Compare and contrast the spiritual and metaphysical quests of Pem, Everett, and Sarah.

5. Chart the course of Pem's relationship with Sarah Blumenthal, from their first meeting at the synagogue where the stolen cross is discovered, to their wedding reception at the close of the book. What qualities attract Pem to Sarah? Sarah to Pem? And in terms of the book's major themes, what are the implications of their union? How does their marriage affect Everett? What is it about these two ecclesiastics that Everett finds so fascinating?

6. "You say all history has contrived to pour this beer into my glass," says the nameless Vietnam veteran to Everett. Later, Pem speaks of "a great historically amassed communal creation." And finally, much earlier in the novel, Rabbi Joshua asks, "Is time a loop? Do you have the same feeling I have?that everything seems to be running backwards? That civilization is in reverse?" What is going on in all of these lines? What theme is Doctorow underscoring here?

7. How might the Jewish notion of Messianic time, in which all of history becomes meaningful retrospectively by the sudden and unexpected coming of the Messiah, be linked to the themes in **City of God**?

8. **City of God** is one of those perfect books for reading clubs and discussions among friends, because much of the power in this novel derives from what the author leaves unsaid, from what lies in the spaces between the characters' perceptions, and from the ways Doctorow invites the reader to draw her/his own conclusions and make her/his own conjectures. Discuss your reactions to Doctorow's characters and their relationships to each other. What techniques does the author use to develop the novel's central characters? What particular qualities make these people so believable and/or affecting?

9. Discuss the book's extended portrait of the man who discovers that his life is gradually becoming a movie. What is going on here? Fill in the blanks of Doctorow's metaphor.

10. Pem ferociously struggles with the Judeo-Christian tradition?in much the way his real-life forebear, James Pike, did?because it appears to him to be more a narrative about power, genocidal destruction, and the renunciation of human reason and intellect than about faith, hope, and love. "I take the position that true faith is not a supersessional knowledge. It cannot discard the intellect. . . . How can we presume to exalt our religious vision over the ordinary pursuits of our rational minds?" Interpret Pem's remarks here to the bishop's examiners. Then re-read Pem's crowning toast at the wedding, the culmination of his struggle. How does this impassioned and captivating speech serve to bring together the myriad fragments that have preceded it in **City of God**?

Author Bio

E. L. Doctorow?s works of fiction included HOMER & LANGLEY, THE MARCH, BILLY BATHGATE, RAGTIME, THE BOOK OF DANIEL, CITY OF GOD, WELCOME TO HARD TIMES, LOON LAKE, WORLD'S FAIR, THE WATERWORKS and ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD.

Among his honors were the National Book Award, three National Book Critics Circle Awards, two PEN Faulkner Awards, The Edith Wharton Citation for Fiction, and the presidentially conferred National Humanities Medal. In 2009 he was shortlisted for the Man Booker International Prize honoring a writer?s lifetime achievement in fiction, and in 2012 he won the PEN Saul Bellow Award given to an author whose ?scale of achievement over a sustained career places him in the highest rank of American Literature.? In 2013 the American Academy of Arts and Letters awarded him the Gold Medal for Fiction.

Doctorow passed away on July 21, 2015 at the age of 84, following complications from lung cancer.

Critical Praise

"The greatest American novel of the past 50 years . . . reading City of God restores one's faith in literature."

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